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ABSTRACT

Estimates of the true extent of illiteracy among the United States's adult population vary widely. The Department of Education has estimated that there are 23 million illiterate Americans and an additional 46 million American who function only marginally in an increasingly technological society. Federal support for adult literacy began in 1965 when funds for adult basic education (ABE) began filtering to state education departments under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. During ABE's first decade there was some success in establishing broadly available programs giving adults greater access to literacy and basic education assistance. Nevertheless, as of 1975, literacy programs were only reaching a small fraction of those who needed them. Since 1975, significant developments have occurred and funding has increased substantially. Beginning in 1983, the literacy initiative, while not providing any additional fiscal support, attempted to extend literacy services through awareness campaigns, the use of volunteer tutors, and privately funded support. Although substantial progress has been made, many problems remain. Adult literacy has often been supported as a means of achieving other economic and social development policies. Although this is both appropriate and commendable, policymakers must not lose sight of adult literacy and learning as ends in themselves. (MN)

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TOWARD THE VISION OF A LITERATE SOCIETY

by

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Strategic Educational Systems

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Background Paper Prepared for

Project on Adult Literacy

of the

Southport Institute for Policy Analysis

December 1988

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FOREWORD

This paper is one of several prepared by consultants to The Project on Adult Literacy sponsored by the Southport Institute for Policy Analysis. The papers were commissioned to help the Project's staff develop an in-depth understanding of various issues and perspectives bearing on the federal role in promoting adult literacy.

In total, seven papers were commissioned. They were prepared during the fall of 1988. The consultants who prepared them met as a group five times during that period and vigorously debated each other's work as well as other issues concerning adult literacy. At no time during this process did the Project's staff require that the consultants agree with each other or with the conclusions being formulated by the staff. The consultants were given complete freedom to state their own ideas.

As a result, the views expressed in this paper are those of the author alone. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the Southport Institute, the Project on Adult Literacy or any of the other consultants involved with the Project's work.

The Southport Institute is making these working papers available to help increase understanding and stimulate discussion about the problems of adult literacy and as an expression of gratitude for the contribution of the authors to the Project on Adult Literacy.

The working papers prepared for the Project are:

Judith A. Alamprese:	Adult Research and Development: An Agenda for Action
William B. Bliss:	Providing Adult Basic Education Services to Adults with Limited English Proficiency
Jack A. Brizius:	The State Role in Adult Literacy Policy
Paul V. Delker and William J. Yakowicz:	Toward the Vision of a Literate Society
Susan E. Foster:	Professionalization of the Adult Literacy Workforce
Arnold Packer:	Retooling the American Workforce: The Role of Technology in Improving Adult Literacy During the 1990s
William F. Pierce:	A Redefined Federal Role in Adult Literacy: Integrated Policies, Programs, and Procedures

These papers are available from: The Project on Adult Literacy, Suite 415, 440 First Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20001, (202) 783-7058.

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TOWARD THE VISION OF A LITERATE SOCIETY

by

Paul V. Delker and William J. Yakowicz

THE NEED

Estimating the Problem

> Probably the single greatest complicating factor in trying to determine the extent of illiteracy is the lack of effort made to collect valid data... 1/

Over most of the last three decades, statistics issued by the United States Bureau of the Census suggested virtually all adult Americans were literate. As recently as 1980, Bureau data showed an illiteracy rate of less than one percent, amounting to only about 900,000 adults. 2/ However, since this rate was based on citizen self-reports of school grades completed, both the data collection method and the results were questioned by most working in the field of adult education. Kozol, one of the Bureau's harsher critics, asserted:

> ...over 60 million U.S. adults cannot read enough to understand the poison warnings on a can of pesticide or the antidote instructions on a can of kitchen lye; nor can they understand the warnings of the sedative effects of nonprescription drugs, read editorials in a newspaper, nor read the publications of the U.S. Census, which persists in telling us with stubborn, jingoistic pride that 99.4% of all Americans can read and write. 3/

Lending some credence to this charge were a number of indicators suggesting a problem of much greater proportion

than officially reported. In 1979 alone, nearly 2 million adults were reported to be enrolled in federally supported adult basic and secondary education programs, 4/ and many thousands more were engaged in literacy learning in community colleges, voluntary, and community based organizations. 5/ More telling, however, were increasingly publicized research findings from national studies. The Adult Performance Level project (APL), as one example, estimated that up to twenty percent of all Americans were functionally illiterate, and possibly another thirty percent were able to function only marginally. 6/ Hunter and Harman's seminal Ford Foundation study, synthesizing APL findings and a broad array of additional research, produced more cautious estimates. Nonetheless, they concluded that illiteracy was far more pervasive than indicated by grade completion data collected by the Bureau of Census.

Responding to concerns regarding accuracy of available information, the Bureau of Census adapted a test, the Measure of Adult English Proficiency, in devising an alternative approach to determining the extent of illiteracy. 7/ A total of 3,400 foreign born and native English speaking adults over age twenty eventually participated in the study. The sample was not representative of the adult population, and the validity of findings was questioned by the acting director of the Bureau, who noted, "I don't think we found the right

number. I think we found the floor." 8/ Still, the Bureau estimated that approximately 17 to 21 million adults, about thirteen percent of the population, could be considered functionally illiterate.

By September of 1983, at the urging of Education Secretary Bell and others concerned that the nation was "at risk," the administration initiated a national effort dedicated to the "elimination of adult functional illiteracy in the United States." No additional federal funds would be requested as the "zero budget" initiative was to mobilize volunteers as well as business and industry. An Education Department "Fact Sheet" noted this effort would be directed at an estimated 23 million functionally illiterate Americans as well as an additional 46 million adults who functioned only marginally in our increasingly technological society. 9/

What is literacy?

Two major factors contribute to the obvious confusion regarding the extent of the "hidden problem" of functional illiteracy in the United States. Estimates ranging from less than one percent to more than forty percent of the population certainly point out the differences in data collection methods. More importantly, however, differences in numbers are directly attributable to differences in definitions. If literacy is defined in terms of completing six grades of schooling, traditional Census figures are accurate. After

all, since the beginning of this century less than 10 percent of all Americans have been unable to remain in school through the sixth grade. Similarly, by defining literacy in terms of "success" and measuring it through adult performance on a written test, APL estimates were, perhaps, accurate as well. Thus, it has been suggested, that what is needed to alleviate much of this confusion is a uniform, nationally acceptable definition of what it means to be literate. 10/

Unfortunately, most current research strongly suggests that such a definition is not attainable on a national level. 11/ Literacy is now understood to be contextual and functional in nature, and not simply the ability to read or write at a specified grade level. 12/ From this perspective, literacy is defined as:

> the possession of skills perceived as necessary by particular persons and groups to fulfill their own self-determined objectives as family and community members, citizens, job-holders, and members of social, religious, or other associations of their choosing. This includes the ability to obtain information they want and to use that information for their own and others' well-being; the ability to read and write adequately to satisfy the requirements they set for themselves as being important for their own lives; and the ability to solve the problems they face in their daily lives. 13/

Since literacy serves different purposes and has different meanings to different people under different circumstances, there can be "no single-level of literacy, on a single continuum from reader to non-reader, but a variety of configurations of literacy, a plurality of literacies." 14/

Dynamic and contextually dependent as literacy is, efforts to arrive at a precise, nationally acceptable definition will remain, as Harman suggests, "like a walk to the horizon." 15/ However, attaining greater precision is not a requirement at this point. By using a generally accepted policy-making approach of discarding both the highest and lowest estimates, Brizius and Foster find that the nation is still left with a major problem. 16/ The problem, however one chooses to define it, continues to grow. Too many of the 750,000 young people who drop out of school each year have a difficult time functioning in our increasingly complex society, and a large percentage of the 850,000 immigrants who arrive here annually not only need English language instruction, they also need to acquire literacy in their own language. 17/ Considering this, perhaps Harold McGraw is right in contending that, "obviously, when you've got a problem of that dimension, the exact figures aren't all that important." 18/

Diverse and pluralistic learning needs

> No one knows how many Americans are illiterate; many millions, for sure, and their number is increasing even as their opportunities for employment are decreasing. 19/

Employment, poverty, and related economic concerns are foremost in the minds of many who seek assistance in literacy. Millions of adults enroll in literacy programs in order to build skills necessary to apply for a job, to find a new job,

to obtain a license, to gain entry into a better occupation, and to secure a promotion. Improved literacy may very well be one means to a job or more productive employment. Of course, such concerns serve as a driving force behind the recent national interest in adult illiteracy. It is clear now that such technological advancements as the proliferation of robotics in the workplace have not helped to reduce literacy requirements, as was once expected. Instead, these changes have combined with an intricately interconnected global economy to place ever increasing literacy demands on American workers. 20/ It is increasingly recognized that the ability to compete successfully in a new and continually changing global market is tied directly to the literacy levels of American workers. 21/

An effective national adult literacy initiative would be expected to contribute to the development of a workforce that is qualified to compete in an integrated global market. It is, however, a mistake to view literacy in these terms alone. Increasing levels of literacy are needed in many contexts outside the workplace as well, and these needs must also be addressed. Mezirow, for instance, argues that:

> People need to be able to read and write so they can more fully understand their experience. When we fail to understand what an experience means, we can't know how to take needed action.... We have to understand our experience. In this, we differ significantly from apes and computers. 22/

And from no less a compelling perspective, one adult new reader contends:

> I've always been able to get a job and will always feed and clothe my family. What I couldn't do was read to my daughter, couldn't help her with homework. I had to make sure she didn't have to deal with the same things I did. The most important thing is that she has things better. I had no choice. I had to find a program to help me learn to read so I could help her. 23/

This is not an isolated case. Studies have documented what many literacy instructors have understood for years, that adults enter programs for a wide variety of reasons beyond those related to employment. Adults want to learn to read the Bible, to understand a contract, to balance a checkbook, to read to their grandchildren, to write letters to family and friends, to communicate with their children's teachers, and to gain access to information needed to vote knowledgeably. There are many needs and contexts for literacy just as there are many reasons for not acquiring needed abilities in the first place.

Similarly, the literacy learner population itself is diverse, no less so than the population at large. Anyone visiting a literacy or adult basic education program readily recognizes that "a range of diversity of students probably unprecedented in American education is the [class's] most significant distinguishing characteristic...." 24/ Illiteracy is obviously a problem which transcends all economic, social, racial, and geographic boundaries. The literacy learner may

be a recent immigrant striving to become an American, but could as easily be a farmer in Vermont, a migrant worker in Arizona, a business owner in Illinois, an unemployed laborer in Louisiana, or a retired mill worker in South Carolina. Increasingly sophisticated research underscores this plurality. Literacy learners are: "...owners of small businesses employing several people, factory workers, skilled trades people, those working in various service industries, unemployed persons looking for jobs, and those not presently in the labor force (e.g., women who do not work outside of the home, retired persons and others)." 25/

Given this diversity in need and the wide ranging contexts within which literacy is required, it is not surprising that the concept is increasingly viewed as multidimensional and complex, not a simple continuum of technical skills. Nor is it surprising that literacy is increasingly defined and understood within the conditions of real life. Hunter reminds us, "the ultimate arbiter of literacy is the individual living in a particular time and place and facing specific demands and opportunities." 26/

Ziegler, Healy, and Ellsworth touched upon this with their work on civic literacy. Literacy, they asserted, is not simply an autonomous set of acquired coping or survival skills. Much more significantly, literacy "addresses a large body of human experience... grounded in universal human

aspirations and competencies." 27/ This conclusion is born out by recent examinations of the meaning of literacy. The cognitive skill clusters traditionally associated with literacy constitute only one dimension of a much larger constellation which includes affective, personal, sociocultural, political, and economic dimensions as well. 28/

Literacy conceived in these broader terms provokes a number of critical questions: To what extent does access to systems, resources, or technologies play a role in acquiring or effectively using literacy? What is the nature of literacy's interaction with larger socioeconomic forces? If literacy can only be understood within the daily contexts of individuals, how can it be appropriately measured? How can educational programs be effectively evaluated?

While such issues cannot be adequately addressed here, they serve to underscore the complexity of the problem. Clearly, helping those in need to improve their literacy is a complex undertaking, "a national dilemma." The source and magnitude of the problem, the size of federal program efforts and the extent of allocated resources, the very meaning and nature of literacy itself all continue to be disputed. Even so, it is increasingly clear that the costs associated with inadequate literacy are nothing short of staggering. They can no longer be ignored or tolerated.

Costs of functional illiteracy

> What do I do if one of my kids starts choking and I go running to the phone? Nine times out of ten, I can't look up the phone number of the hospital. That's if we're at home. Like if we're out on the street, nine times out of ten I can't read the street. If I should get to a pay phone, and they say, ok, tell us where you are, we'll send an ambulance. I look at the street sign. Right there, I couldn't tell you what the name was, I'd have to spell it letter for letter. By that time one of my kids could be dead. These are the kinds of fears you go with every single day of your life, and you can't tell anybody. 29/

Beyond the very real fears expressed above, there are such daily issues as reading a menu, opening a checking account, understanding contracts, negotiating the justice or social service systems. 30/ Poverty, homelessness, drug abuse, and crime have all been related to illiteracy. Children too can pay a disproportionate part of the high costs of illiteracy by not having access to printed ideas in the home, to parental interaction or intervention with the educational system, and in many other ways. Findings from the recent "Assessment of Educational Progress," examined in The Subtle Danger: Reflections on the Literacy Abilities of America's Young Adults, further support a long line of investigations demonstrating the intimate link between parental educational attainment and their children's acquisition of literacy. 31/ Powerful evidence shows us that parents who lack effective literacy skills are less able to help children develop necessary learning abilities.

Societal costs in terms of revenues required for incarceration, additional social services, and a reduced tax base are estimated to be in the billions of dollars. 32/ Costs to the workplace are no less staggering. Employee error and low productivity, industrial accidents, poor product quality, and remedial training programs account for billions more each year. Further costs are evident in corporate recruitment efforts; only 3,619 of 22,880 recent applicants at NYNEX (New York and New England Telephone) were able to demonstrate acceptable skills on entry level tests. 33/ Only one of many recent examples, this clearly underscores the corporate need for a qualified workforce.

John Clendenin, president of a major U.S. corporation, acknowledges this and one other dimension of costs to the corporate sector:

> On the face of it, BellSouth is a technology-oriented company which employs some 100,000 people, mostly in the South, and we are absolutely dependent upon a well-educated workforce. But we care about education for a broader reason: Put bluntly, BellSouth's fortunes are directly linked to the fortunes of the communities we serve.... Any condition which threatens the region's economic health immediately becomes our vital concern...and for the medium and long-term future, we're convinced education is the keystone issue critical for future prosperity.... 34/

Obviously, illiteracy is no longer an individual problem; it is increasingly destructive to the social and economic fabric of the country as a whole. Global interdependence, the dynamic nature of the workplace, the declining numbers and

skill levels of those entering the workforce, and the move to a service and information based economy are all immediate and compelling reasons to invest more fully in adult literacy. The Hudson Institute's Workforce 2000 report, noting the potential for a national crisis, suggests that the failure to do so could substantially diminish our ability to compete in a global marketplace. 35/

The issue is not new, of course. Illiteracy has been a "condition" in the United States for over 200 years. Efforts to help adults acquire literacy have been with us just as long. However, during the last twenty-five years, these efforts were supported by a vision of our becoming a nation of lifelong learners. The vision depended in part on the development of an effective national adult literacy program. While that program has yet the be realized, the vision remains as relevant as ever.

The national adult literacy program

Federal support for adult literacy began in 1965 when funds for adult basic education started to flow to state education departments under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. Earlier federal programs were directed almost entirely to recent adult immigrants, although some basic education was provided in conjunction with programs in the 1930s such as the Civilian Conservation Corps. However, it was not until the

passage of the Economic Opportunity Act that federal funds were directed to all out of school adults lacking basic skills equivalent to an eighth grade level.

Although the new authority came into existence under the "War on Poverty" administered by the new federal Office of Economic Opportunity, the impetus for the adult basic education authority came from educators in the then Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW). In 1962, HEW sought passage of the Adult Literacy Act in support of John F. Kennedy's commitment made in his State of the Union Message of January 11, 1962:

> ...eight million adult Americans are classified as functionally illiterate. This is a disturbing figure--reflected in Selective Service rejection rates--reflected in welfare rolls and crime rates. I shall recommend plans for a massive attack to end adult illiteracy.

While the proposed 1962 act began a new dialogue between the Congress and the Administration, it failed to pass primarily because of southern opposition to improving literacy among blacks in the south. Lyndon B. Johnson's 1964 "Great Society" program provided a new vehicle for HEW to obtain the same authority under a different initiative -- eradicating poverty. Recast in the language of basic skills, Title IIB of the Economic Opportunity Act provided federal support for adult literacy, and as with the earlier attempt, specified

that the vehicle for literacy services should be the public schools.

This policy that public schools were the most effective medium for providing adult literacy education was adopted without debate. Although the adults to be served were largely those who had failed to learn through the public schools, no consideration was given in Congressional hearings for providing a new delivery system specifically designed to meet their learning needs.

Adult literacy can be viewed as an end in itself, as a good thing for everyone to have. It may also be viewed as a means to a complex goal. In the Title IIB authority -- and throughout the Adult Education Act as it was known in 1966 -- literacy was viewed as a means to developing the person, as a necessary element in a person's becoming less dependent on society and to meeting his or her adult responsibilities. 36/ Ironically, that philosophical charge was mandated to a public school system that had always viewed literacy as an end. It was something everyone should have as they entered adult life.

The union of a dynamic notion of adult literacy and a static public education system created a tension that may have been good for public education. However, it militated against state support for adult basic education. State education budgets and chief state school officers continually reflected

-- and to this date reflect -- public education's priority for a self-contained education system designed for children and youth. Furthermore, later federal amendments to the Adult Education Act were designed to make ABE more accessible and relevant by involving non-public school agencies and organizations; however, they received no active support from chief state education officials. Some gains would be made, but only by isolated state officials and practitioners whose commitment to adult education was neither adequately understood nor sufficiently supported by their superiors.

Despite the inability of a youth oriented education system to respond to the needs of undereducated adults, the concept of literacy as a means to adult growth and development over time shaped and informed the evolving adult basic education program. The view of literacy as reading and writing skills acquired in a classroom would be replaced by the norm of functional skills and knowledge related to the requirements of adult living. Grade level equivalencies would yield, albeit begrudgingly, to measures of adult competence. Additionally, the notion that literacy was an absolute standard -- that an adult could be determined to be either literate or illiterate -- would be replaced by the idea that in modern day America, literacy is a continuum directly related to the individual adult's life and aspirations. Finally, the demands of a technological society and a global

economy for increasingly higher levels of literacy brought the issue to national prominence. Almost every sector of society joined the national debate in an effort to address and redress a national dilemma. Adult literacy is no longer simply a concern of the public school system -- it is the concern of the public as a whole.

In retrospect, the federal government's adult literacy efforts over the past twenty years can be characterized as going about it the wrong way. However, those efforts attracted an extraordinary group of dedicated professionals and practitioners. Programs that lack both popular and institutional support can survive and progress only through the dedication, commitment, and newly generated competence of those who share the vision that drives it. The vision of adults moving from a life of personal and economic dependency to a life of personal and economic empowerment created the federal adult literacy program. This vision was embedded in the United States House of Representatives report on the "Economic Opportunity Act of 1964:"

> An overriding consideration is that the learning tools of reading, writing, and arithmetic open the doors of opportunity not only to occupational training and productive work, but also to the larger life of the mind and spirit. The illiterate or near illiterate person, while employed, may be shut out from a whole world of personal growth opportunities as well as from occupational advancement opportunities. Adult basic education is a fundamental approach to independent learning, to adjustment of manpower to changing

> occupational requirements, to elimination of poverty, and to the larger satisfactions in personal growth made possible through acquisition of the basic learning tools. 37/

This vision is perhaps more relevant today than it was twenty-four years ago. Unfortunately, it has been poorly sustained by meager resources, and by an all too small corps of dedicated, overworked professionals and practitioners. While the vision was sound, myriad forces worked against realizing it. After the first decade of federal involvement, one analyst noted serious problems with the effort:

> A million adults are reported enrolled in the ABE program, and the number is increasing each year. This could be considered a gain. But when you realize that these adults represent less than 2 percent of the program's stated target group, the effort looks pathetic, hopelessly inadequate. It is, in fact, difficult to take the whole thing seriously. 38/

Between 1965, when the Adult Basic Education (ABE) program began, and 1976, when the first large scale efforts to assess its impact were widely disseminated, federal resources directed toward adult literacy steadily increased from about $3.1 million to $67 million annually. 39/ By 1980, federal funding leveled off at about $100 million, and state matching funds reported to the Office of Education added approximately twenty-five percent more to the total. Adult learner enrollments in the program increased correspondingly, from about 38,000 in 1965 to nearly 2 million in 1980. The average annual cost per participant between 1968 and 1972 was $90,

with the federal share dropping from $83 in 1965 to about $50 by 1980.

During ABE's first decade, there was some success in "establishing broadly available programs," giving adults greater access to literacy and basic education assistance. Nonetheless, the General Accounting Office noted in its 1975 report to Congress, "as currently funded and operated it is successfully reaching only a small fraction of those needing it--particularly among the more educationally deficient." 40/ Considering the vast number of these potential participants, the investment was indeed meager, and the program itself was, perhaps, rightly referred to as "education on the cheap". 41/

Since 1975, significant developments have occurred and funding has increased substantially. Precise figures on current expenditures are no less difficult to attain than accurate estimates of the need. It has been suggested, however, that the federal government, through some 79 programs -- including military and job training-based literacy efforts -- now directs approximately $347 million annually toward elimination of literacy. Additionally, as Brizius points out later in this volume, current state and local matching funds are approximately $318 million. It should be noted, however, that while most of the state allocation is directly available for literacy efforts, much of the federal funding is restricted to specific job training purposes and, according to

some state directors of adult education, it is extremely difficult to make these available for literacy programming. 42/

Furthermore, even assuming combined federal and state funding has reached $665 million, the total investment in literacy remains small in comparison to education for other populations. For example, the expected 1988/89 expenditure for elementary and secondary education is $196 billion. 43/ Spending for public institutions of higher education will be another $63 billion. If one uses President Reagan's "conservative estimate" of 23 million adults as a base, the combined state and federal allocation for adult literacy amounts to $28 or so annually for each potential literacy learner. On a per participant basis, assuming there are now 3.5 million enrollees, average annual spending amounts to $190 for adult literacy learners, as compared to the expected $4,810 average per pupil cost in public elementary and secondary schools.

Despite fiscal constraints and the legislative bias favoring public schools, from the beginning, federal administrators sought to develop delivery systems and providers that could meet the diverse literacy needs of adults. Through amendments passed in 1978, the Adult Education Act called for expanding the program by involving organizations "other than the public schools," including a

considerable array of voluntary, community based, library, and human resource agencies as well as business and industry.

Commencing in 1983, the literacy initiative, while providing no additional fiscal support, attempted to further extend literacy services through awareness campaigns, the use of volunteer tutors, and privately financed support. The Business Council for Effective Literacy, ABC/PBS Project Literacy US, and related privately sponsored efforts contributed substantially to an increasingly pluralistic delivery system. To make literacy instruction available to adults in a wide variety of settings, parts of this emerging delivery system now include independent agencies, store fronts, volunteer groups, workplace learning centers, libraries, and more. Equally as important, by 1987, the actual number of teachers increased significantly. At present, an estimated 150,000 teachers, volunteer tutors, counselors, and paraprofessionals are working to help 3.5 million adults currently enrolled in the literacy program. Even so, an extensive need stretches far beyond available services and fundamental problems identified by the General Accounting Office in 1975 continue to plague national efforts.

Continuing problems

Investigating the Adult Basic Education program in 1976, the G.A.O. found that:

--Funds are insufficient to provide comprehensive diagnosis and counseling.

--Most of the program's instructors are employed only part-time and have neither the time nor the training to provide such specialized services.

--The program is a minor part of the wide-ranging services offered by most local education agencies and consequently receives only minor attention. 44/

While funds increased substantially since 1975, they remain inadequate. Increases in both the level of literacy required to function in today's society and the number of adults in need of assistance far outpaced any increase in funding. Furthermore, even raised to $190 a year, the amount available to educate each current participant is unrealistic at best. Beyond these are other fundamental difficulties which are exacerbated by the ABE program's traditional dependency on part-time and volunteer workers. First, such a staff needs pre-service training, technical assistance, and continuing support. These services are basic to any field of endeavor, but they are also expensive. In addition, professional quality, action-oriented research and product development are nearly impossible to carry out under current circumstances. Simply gaining access to the body of research which already exists is difficult enough. Finally, there is the persistent problem of maintaining a high quality and consistent level of service.

Developing professionals. Expanding the diversity of the

emerging delivery system is essential to an effective national literacy program for pluralistic learners. The present initiative has made significant contributions in this regard, and the thousands of new volunteer literacy workers have provided valuable assistance to many thousands of new readers. Even so, full-time, professional instruction and support positions now only amount to about five percent of the entire national literacy program. 45/ Unique problems and challenges become self-evident in any large scale effort to deliver basic literacy skills to adults especially when 95 percent of the positions are held by part-time and volunteer workers.

Professionals can work part-time, and part-time persons can be professionally competent, but a program with only five percent of the positions full-time requires an unprecedented professional and program development effort, an effort necessarily conducted in-service. Where preparation for teachers in traditional elementary and secondary school settings is heavily front-loaded, providing at least a basic working background prior to involvement with students, pre-service preparation for volunteers and part-time teachers of adults typically amounts to less than twelve hours of orientation. 46/

The current inservice effort is perhaps even less substantial. Lessons from successful programs, principles and practices of effective adult education, and useful

instructional materials could -- and often do -- provide the content for valuable professional development workshops. Unfortunately, scarcity of time and money reduces access to even these. Most volunteer and part-time literacy workers have job, family, and social responsibilities which can preclude even minimal participation in training programs. Part-time education personnel who are elementary and secondary school teachers find it difficult to participate regularly in continuing professional development programs. For those firmly committed to the field, it is often necessary to work on a part-time basis primarily because full-time opportunities are not available. Thus, time devoted to professional development can substantially reduce earnings because many of these professionals work for an hourly pay-rate, sometimes at two or more education agencies. 47/ Even those who work in the field full-time find that their salary is inadequate; generally lower than public school teachers with comparable education and experience. More often than not, these professionals do not earn enough to take relevant graduate courses at the state university.

Changes in funding (particularly the block grant formula) have produced additional problems for teachers and administrators. Competition for limited funds further constrains existing resources. For instance, voluntary, community based agencies, public schools, and community

colleges all vie with each other for financial support, reducing potential for professional or program development. Further, some states have redeployed resources once used for program improvement to compliance monitoring instead. 48/

Research needs. With the limited core of full-time professional adult literacy educators, inadequate funding levels, low salaries, long waiting lists of adults seeking assistance, and demanding work loads, it is not surprising that little action-oriented research and product development related to adult literacy has been conducted. Although a dramatic increase in the amount of research is evident over the last fifteen years, it remains woefully inadequate. Practitioners who should be conducting their own action research on a continuing basis typically lack the support, interest, or ability to do so. Researchers in universities and professional associations often lack the time and money to support practitioner efforts or to engage in such activities on their own. Even though some good and useful research has been conducted, the literacy effort even now tends to be informed more by intuition than by demonstrated performance and results. As such, trial and error remains the foundation for practice, and instructional methods and products are employed more on the basis of personal preference than on tested value.

While fiscal resources may not be readily accessible,

insights from wide ranging experience and carefully conducted research can be. Recognizing the necessity for an accessible research base as long ago as 1970, Federal efforts were initiated to develop a systematic mechanism to make information more widely available to practitioners. While some of these efforts demonstrated great promise, 49/ national information dissemination, diffusion, and adoption efforts terminated in 1974 when developmental funds were transferred to the states. Subsequent state attempts to meet these needs of the field have, in many instances, also been inadequate. Additionally, perhaps because adult learning -- especially learning for disadvantaged adults -- has not been a priority of federally supported research, even those that were effective have for the most part been abandoned.

Evaluation and quality control. For similar reasons, careful evaluation and quality control have been lacking. As one might expect, a coherent set of evaluative criteria is not the hallmark of an inadequately funded program staffed with a tiny core of full-time professionals. In addition, commercially available tests and related evaluation materials are often developed from research originally conducted with children. Even when publishers target specifically for the adult literacy market, these materials have limited or questionable value. 50/

Many suggest that the currently increasing demand for

services make evaluation of literacy efforts impractical. The proliferation of services must come first. After all, the waiting list in New York City alone has over 13,000 people, 51/ and nationally many thousands more are annually denied the opportunity to enroll. The tendency to ignore evaluation can be even stronger among volunteer literacy organizations which are not subject to accountability reviews required by federal guidelines and state legislatures. Of course the pressure to deliver services is no less severe for voluntary and independent agencies than for publicly supported programs, and fiscal resources can be even more difficult for them to secure. But philosophical reasons too can interfere. Some suggest that: "...it is no more appropriate to test for literacy than it would be to test a religious convert for holiness." 52/ .These positions are cited only to underscore the need to empower all literacy personnel with adequate resources, requisite competencies, and knowledge of effective adult education practices. Voluntary and independent providers are certainly as important to success of the national literacy effort as any other component.

Given these difficulties, however, it is perhaps to be expected that the quality of service available to learners varies greatly. And while confusion often prevails in the determination of national program efficacy, most available indicators suggest wide-spread improvements recommended over a

decade ago have yet to materialize.

Although the program has consistently grown in terms of both resources and participants served, the number of those in need of assistance continues to constitute a national embarrassment. The Education Department estimates that 23 million adults are functionally illiterate and another 46 million function only marginally. Yet in 1986 the combined federal, state, and voluntary effort provided help to only about 3 million adult learners. As William Pierce notes:

> Using that rate of service, even if we were somehow able to freeze the size of the pool at this moment, it would take us until 2006 to train just those in the target population. Unfortunately, we can't freeze the pool. With dropouts, functionally illiterate graduates, and immigrants constantly replenishing the target group, we add an estimated 2.3 million adults each year. Obviously, we need a new commitment and a new workable solution. 53/

As discouraging as this may appear, the picture is even bleaker still when one considers the success rates of program efforts. Data on successful attainment of learning goals are at best inadequate and at worst misleading. Best guesses at this point suggest that somewhere between 40 percent and 70 percent of the program participants leave programs prior to attaining their goals. Federal statistics for 1986 indicate about 52% of the 844,000 adults who left programs fit this category. Of course, adults do have family, health, transportation and related problems which can interfere with successful completion of a learning activities. Even so,

55.4% of those who leave do so for "other reasons," they never specify.

Some have suggested that enrollment levels have been low and dropout rates high because "the undereducated did not want to learn." 54/ We now know that this is not the case, of course, and that all adults - undereducated or not -- are necessarily engaged in learning. 55/ The currently excessive "drop-out" rate, then, suggests more about the quality of program efforts than about the learners themselves. Thus, even when they are successful in attracting learners, many programs fail to provide the effective instruction and support needed to help participants meet their individual goals.

THE RESOURCES

A wide range of existing and emerging resources can be directed toward more effective support of literacy learning. Many have been available for years, while others were generated during the recent national literacy initiative. It is generally recognized that the growing number of literacy providers has increased competition for inadequate funds, that services continue to be fragmentary and uncoordinated as well as inconsistent, and that the literacy program nationally remains too small to do the job. Still, when viewed collectively, these resources show potential for future improvements in the field.

Universities and professional associations are valuable

but largely untapped resources. Since 1932, when the first graduate program in adult education began, a network of 54 programs -- some strongly oriented toward adult basic education -- has emerged. 56/ In the years since, formal research as well as theory and knowledge building in adult education accelerated dramatically. This work has provided insights into adult learning and its facilitation, effective approaches to organizing and administering literacy programs, useful strategies for evaluating effort, and much more. Simultaneously, a range of national, state, and local level professional associations emerged to support practitioners. The International Reading Association, American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (especially its Commission on Adult Basic Education), Association for Community Based Education, and others -- along with their state and local affiliates -- have made significant contributions to the literacy effort. Together with graduate programs in colleges and universities these organizations have identified principles and practices of adult education and tested an array of tools and products.

Federal and state adult education resources are no less significant. With more than twenty years of literacy and basic education experience upon which to draw, there is some understanding of what works, what does not, and what is needed in the field. In addition, the United States Office of

Education experienced considerable success in helping universities build departments of adult and continuing education and provided assistance needed for school district-based efforts. Thus a wide-ranging network of federal, state and related agencies could be mobilized to strengthen literacy efforts.

Findings from earlier experiments in clearinghouse, innovation center, development, diffusion and dissemination should not be overlooked. Related experiences with currently operating networks, including such organizations as the National Diffusion Network, the ERIC Clearinghouses, and state sponsored Adult Education Resource Centers provide a foundation for further development. While some notable resources have been closed or subjected to funding cuts -- most notably the National Adult Education Clearinghouse and the New Jersey Adult Education Resource Centers -- their contributions could be utilized and their lessons adapted. For example, The Adult Education Resource Center at Glassboro State College has provided technical assistance, training, and resource support to adult educators and literacy workers for twenty-four years. The state Department of Education's focus on compliance monitoring at the expense of professional and program development resulted in the termination of the center's funding. This would appear to be ill advised in light of the pressing need for professional development

Nonetheless, lessons learned and resources collected over twenty-four years should not be lost.

Similarly, community college systems throughout the U.S. have been major providers of literacy and basic education. Further, lessons from extensive military based efforts, the work of ACTION and VISTA, recent work study opportunities, and a host of others have much potential for research as well as practice.

Voluntary and community based efforts also have a long and valuable history in the field of adult literacy. Since Frank Laubach introduced his "each one teach one" notion to the United States in the mid 1950's, programs have grown to the point where an estimated 100,000 volunteers are providing literacy instruction. Significant municipal efforts, including the Mayor's Commission on Literacy in Philadelphia and the New York City Adult Literacy Initiative have contributed proven practices and products to the national effort. Some of the more important include new materials and new insights concerning effective assessment of literacy learning and the evaluation of large scale literacy programming.

In addition, since the late 1800's America's libraries have taken a lead in providing literacy services, a leadership role which is increasingly evident in American Library Association's work with the Coalition for Literacy. Other

related resources are essentially untapped, including the health, employment, and human resource agencies which often encounter learners at teachable moments. With access to information and professional guidance, such agencies might effectively address adults' learning needs. Private Industry Councils and JTPA supported agencies might also be mobilized to support the least educated.

Emerging private sector and union sponsored resources have a role to play as well. Even though it would seem that a federal budget of a trillion dollars would have sufficient room in it to easily triple or quadruple a total literacy allocation some contend to be $665 million or so, the staggering national debt may restrict federal funds available for adult literacy. Should this be the case, corporate and union investments in human resources will be increasingly important. The Business Council for Effective Literacy and the ABC/PBS PLUS initiative demonstrated how such investments can succeed in making literacy a national issue. And significant dividends have been realized through Gannett Foundation funding of literacy efforts, earlier B. Dalton Bookseller support of important projects, and investments in workplace literacy programs found in such major corporations as Polaroid and NYNEX. Additionally, research and development projects supported by corporate and foundation funds have resulted in valuable products and services.

Among the more promising efforts to emerge are those of a collaborative nature. For instance, The Pennsylvania State University collaboration with the volunteer-based Center for Literacy in Philadelphia has produced research findings with potentially far-reaching implications. Illustrating the power of this latter arrangement, Lytle and her associates report significant progress in developing new approaches to assessment of literacy learning needs. Consistent with the social context view of literacy discussed earlier, this method utilizes real-life materials in conjunction with extensive interviews to gain insights into what literacy means to learners, how it will be used by them, and how to best initiate a learning partnership with program participants. Not only do the actual findings and assessment products and procedures have great value to the field, the collaborative effort itself serves as a model for future efforts elsewhere.

Clearly, the diverse albeit fragmented delivery system which has emerged over the last twenty or more years is essential. Diversity alone, however, is not enough. James Duffy suggested:

> The answer lies in working together. No single organization, no one political initiative has the scope to address the issue. What is required is the establishment of partnerships--between industries, public and private sectors, media and educators, religious and civic groups--that will encourage constructive change with lasting impact. The opportunities exist. What remains now is the task of building bridges and

> developing a national agenda to build a strong, productive workforce for America's future. 57/

Part of the answer, of course, lies in working together. It may be that partnerships, collaborative efforts, and joint ventures among the few resources cited above could build the bridges and bring desperately needed improvements to the field. A national agenda for a literate America could further this work. Unfortunately, without a national commitment to address fundamental problems in the field, understaffed and under-professionalized literacy programs continue to compete for inadequate funds, adults seeking to acquire new skills and abilities are denied access to adequate or appropriate help, and the quality of our literacy effort overall remains questionable.

A national commitment may one day allow every literacy practitioner to profit from insights developed during more than fifty years of research and practice in the field of adult education. Under present conditions, however, the vast majority of practitioners work in isolation and struggle in ignorance. They are scarcely aware that those who struggled in the moonlight schools of the late 1800's, the immigrant programs of the 1920's, the citizenship schools of the 1960's, and the many other turning points in the history of adult learning left a legacy of proven practices, effective products, and guiding principles. That legacy can be used to

realize a vision of the literate society.

TOWARD THE LITERATE SOCIETY

The vision that created and guided the Adult Education Act was not flawed. It was, in fact, remarkably enlightened, viewing literacy as a fundamental approach "to adjustment of manpower to changing occupational requirements," on the one hand, and to "independent learning" as the door of opportunity to "the larger life of the mind and spirit," on the other hand.

If we as a nation had understood and were faithful to that vision, we would not be facing the present challenges. If during the past twenty years basic education had been promoted effectively as the key to adjusting to changing occupational requirements and to pursuing the larger life of the mind and spirit, we would have both a more competitive workforce and a people better qualified to democratically lead the world. Now, however, both our competitiveness and our leadership are in jeopardy.

Mistakes of the past need not be repeated. The vision has been articulated. It has only to be realized.

In realizing the vision, care must be taken to preserve it. The earlier quotation from the House Report supports literacy and adult learning as essential elements in economic growth and prosperity. It also supports them as "a

fundamental approach" to unspecified independent learning. In the first instance, support for basic education is as a means to economic development. In the second instance, supporting every citizen's ability to learn independently without specifying the content of that learning constitutes support for literacy and basic education as an end, i.e. as a democratic value meriting support for its own sake -- a reaffirmation of Jeffersonian democracy.

In both the public and private sectors, we are beginning to realize that the inability of adults in the workplace to learn independently is a major barrier to global economic competitiveness. Available data suggest that as a nation we spend as much if not more money on training and educating our workforce as other leading nations, but the inability of much of our workforce to acquire new skills readily and to learn on their own is a serious shortcoming. Workforce training increasingly includes basic skills (the preferred term in business and industry to describe literacy); furthermore, the ability to learn independently is now considered by many to be a basic skill. 58/

What was understood by at least some lawmakers in 1964 is increasingly demonstrated in our daily work life. But if we are to preserve the original vision -- the Jeffersonian dimension -- we must be careful not to see independent

learning as relevant only to the workplace, for in so doing we would specify learning for economic development as the only legitimate content. We would no longer support truly independent learning and its value to the larger life of the mind and spirit for their own sake. We would rather be subscribing to the policy that basic skills and independent learning are purely and simply means to economic growth and prosperity.

In point of fact, public support for adult learning in the United States has most often been used as a means to economic growth and development. Even the landmark 19th century Morrill Act that generated our land grant colleges was driven principally by our need to improve agricultural production. The largest federal support for adult learning in this century -- manpower training programs -- clearly utilized adult learning in support of a policy to achieve fuller employment and economic growth.

Throughout our history, we have employed learning as a response to crisis. We have elected to learn our way out of crises more often than we have resorted to alternatives such as violence and prohibitions. 59/ This ability to employ learning as the most constructive means to overcome crisis and to meet other goals is one of our most democratic and laudable characteristics as a nation. If we are to provide true world

leadership, we must do it principally through the learning response. However, if as a nation we employ the learning response only to overcome crisis and as a means to other goals, we will fall short of the full vision. And we will fall short of full leadership.

For adult literacy and learning to be the handmaiden of other economic and social policies -- that is, for it to be a means of achieving those policies -- is both appropriate and laudable. But to restrict public support for adult literacy and learning as a means to other goals is both shortsighted and destructive of the larger life of the mind and spirit. It is shortsighted because what we will need to know to avoid future crises is not all that predictable, as our present crisis of competitiveness illustrates. (Learning our way out of the present crisis consists largely of playing "catch up," which is another term for shortsighted.) It is destructive of the larger life of the mind and spirit because it requires that the entire content of learning be utilitarian and pragmatic, which is to say that all learning must be means-oriented.

Thus, if we are to be faithful to and preserve the original vision, we must support adult literacy and learning both as means to learning our way out of present problems and as ends in themselves unrelated to prescribed purposes and

goals. And we must learn from our failures of the last twenty years.

Why was the vision not achieved? Our failure stems from two factors: the failure to identify or create a mechanism that could generate and support a robust pluralistic delivery system diverse enough to meet the multiplicity of adult learning needs, subcultures, and lifestyles; and the failure as a nation to make available the resources required to make such a system effective.

We have no clear model for creating the kind of pluralistic delivery system required. It must be invented. Experience in health care systems and the outreach programs of the 1960s and 70s provide some guidance, but they do not constitute models for delivering literacy learning services to all adults who need them. The principle contained in the 1978 amendments to the Adult Education Act calling for linking educational services with organizations already providing other social services to adults is a sound one, but state education agencies and their local extensions are congenitally incapable of linking with the diversity of organizations required. In addition, they are too often unable to accommodate learning goals unrelated to those prescribed by the education establishment. What is required, then, are new and flexible mechanisms to support diversity without

prescribing how that diversity will be manifested. This is not to say that those organizations will not be held accountable for results. On the contrary, it argues for rigorous accountability and evaluation, but these must be primarily measured in terms of outcomes and results rather than in prescribed formats and conventional measures of learning gains.

In moving to a more vigorous pluralistic delivery system for adult literacy and learning, it will be critical to honor and support existing components of that system, especially the state administered ABE program. The acknowledged shortcomings of that system are not the fault of the people that make it up; they are the fault of a society that did not devote the resources required to realize their vision. Despite inadequate resources, the program works very well for a significant number of our citizens. A few states are even close to realizing the pluralism and diversity needed, suggesting they may be able to achieve it readily when new technical assistance and professional development resources are made available. It would be a grave error to reject their strengths. The knowledge and experience embedded in that system must be evaluated and extended through a plurality of providers. These providers in turn will lead us to new knowledge and experience which, if properly supported through research, evaluation, and professional development resources,

will result in our becoming a literate and learning society.

The vision of a literate America has not failed. It has never really been tried. Both our survival and our fulfillment now require that we live out that vision.

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